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## THE STELA OF MENTHU-WESER

IN the November BULLETIN, 1912, brief notice was given of a valuable Egyptian stela, <sup>1</sup>the gift of Mr. Edward S. Harkness, and the intention to publish this new acquisition in the near future was announced. The publication is now nearly ready and it seems also desirable at this time to offer to the readers of the BULLETIN a somewhat fuller statement of the stela's special points of interest than was possible earlier.

In the first place, this stela is notable among extant monuments of its class for its fine workmanship and excellent condition, including the preservation of much of its original color. The stela is funerary in character, and according to the inscription upon it, dates from the seventeenth year of the reign of Sesostris I, that is, from about 1963 B. C. The personage, Menthu-weser, whom it commemorates is represented seated below. Before him are members of his family, a son, a daughter, and his father, the father appearing in the lower right-hand corner. From the legends accompanying the small figures of the relief and from one statement in the long inscription it is possible to reconstruct the family tree for four generations. The offerings on the table in front of Menthu-weser, with the exception of the lotus flower, are all things to eat. The pictured table of offerings is frequent in the decoration of Egyptian grave monuments; its presence assured magically to the deceased an abundance of food in the next life.

But the main interest of the stela is contained in its long inscription. This has a double value. It furnishes material both for the philologist and for the student of economic conditions and political organization in ancient Egypt. Among Egyptologists the longer inscriptions on grave stelae of the Middle Kingdom have a reputation for obscure constructions and rare words and Menthu-weser's inscription proved no exception to the rule. It is

very difficult and some passages cannot be made out with certainty, though the general content of the inscription is clear. Some words, known in only two or three other inscriptions, appear here in a context which helps to define their meaning. A few others are of unique occurrence and their meaning can only be inferred from the context and the signs used in writing them.<sup>2</sup> The explanation should be made, perhaps, that the study of the Egyptian language, though on a sound scientific basis, is not so far advanced as, for instance, that of Greek or Latin. The philological interest of this inscription is such that it has already been incorporated with the other texts filed, word by word, in the Egyptian dictionary now in process of formation in Berlin. In dealing with the inscription, corruptions in the text, as it is preserved, increase the difficulties. The men who cut inscriptions in stone were illiterate artisans who were prone to make mistakes in reading the copy furnished to them. Such copy was in the cursive form of writing in everyday use — now called hieratic — and was written on papyrus or even on fragments of pottery. To the modern student, familiar with hieratic as well as with hieroglyphic writing, some of the mistakes made by the stone-cutter are obvious and the text can be emended with assurance. In other instances it may be a question whether the obscurity of a passage is due to corruption in the text or to insufficient acquaintance as yet with some of the details of Middle-Kingdom Egyptian. It will be clear that every inscription presenting new features which can be made available to scholars in an adequate publication helps a little to further the understanding of the Egyptian language.

The title borne by Menthu-weser, ordinarily translated "Steward," here, at least, is better rendered "Domain-superintendent." It was a very common title, but the details given in the Menthu-

<sup>1</sup>Acc. no. 12.184. Height, m. 1.03; width, m. 0.50; thickness, m. 0.08. On exhibition in the Fifth Egyptian Room.

<sup>2</sup>Many Egyptian words have, following the phonetic signs, other non-phonetic characters — the so-called determinatives — which indicate the class of objects, actions, or ideas into which the meaning of the word falls.

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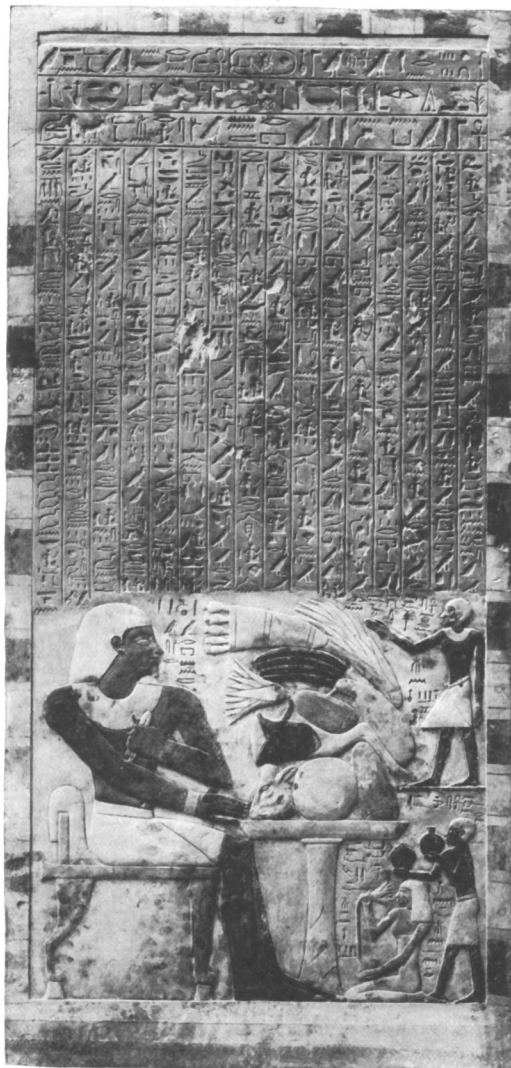
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STELA OF MENTHU-WESER

weser inscription of the duties and emoluments of one such officer are unusually full, and form, therefore, the chief interest in the subject matter of the text. Menthu-weser, it appears, was in charge of certain lands which either belonged to the king or at least were being administered for his benefit. These lands must have been of considerable extent, for they required the labor of some three thousand people. Grain — a particular kind known as "Northern barley" — and stock were raised. The latter included cattle, gazelles, sheep, asses, and swine. Clothing, made presumably by the women, was produced on the estate and was delivered by Menthu-weser at the central royal storehouse of the land. We are told, too, of the private wealth which this domain-superintendent accumulated in the course of the performance of his official duties — presumably by some system of working on shares. He acquired herds and flocks similar to those which he administered for the king — only lacking the swine. He was well off in grain, both barley and wheat; he had numerous boats, and perhaps vineyards (the word is a little uncertain), and possessed fine clothing.

The Middle Kingdom, the period from which the stela dates, has often been likened to the feudal age in Europe. Certainly the monarch had not the strong control of the resources of the entire land which his predecessors of the Old Kingdom possessed, but rather the government was a decentralized one, and the nobles in power in the various nomes, or political divisions, though giving allegiance to the king, ruled with great independence within their respective territories. There is inscriptional evidence for the pasturing of royal herds within the territory of such nome chieftains and for the appointment of crown servants to look after these herds. But the revenues from this royal property passed to the nomarch and by him were delivered to the king.<sup>1</sup> In the inscription of Menthu-weser there is not a suggestion of the existence of such an intermediary.

<sup>1</sup>Passages given in translation in Breasted, *Ancient Records*, I, § 522, with note a. Cf. also the same author's *History*, 2d ed., p. 162.

On the contrary, Menthu-weser clearly had dealings directly with the "king's domain," that is, with the central bureau for the administration of the crown possessions. He rendered accounts which were approved and he received thanks. His faithful service must have awakened the gratitude of his royal master, for the first line of the inscription states that this stela was a gift to Menthu-weser from Sesostris. The stela was found at Abydos at the shrine of the god Osiris, where devout Egyptians from all parts of the land were wont to be buried or to be held in remembrance by memorial stones, and the inscription gives no clue as to the part of Egypt in which Menthu-weser's activity lay. But it is reasonable to suppose that it was within a district — possibly near to the capital city, to hazard a guess — in which the royal prerogatives were not so curtailed by the strength of the local chieftains as they seem to have been generally in the nomes.

In common with other contemporary funerary inscriptions, this text reflects something of the growing regard for social justice and of the recognition of moral standards which are more fully expressed in the literary productions of the age. For instance, Menthu-weser says:

"There was no distress for the one to whom I gave.

I apportioned the chief cut of meat to those sitting at my side."

and again:

"I was a father to the poor orphan child, one who cared for the widows.

No man slept hungry in my district, I hindered no man at the ferry."

Any one who has talked with modern Egyptian fellahin has been amused by their naïve boastfulness with regard to their own cleverness and virtues. One could almost imagine a present-day Egyptian speaking, as one reads certain passages in the old funerary inscriptions. But even though the statements must be taken with a grain of salt, it is noteworthy that

the men of two thousand years before Christ desired to have reputations for generosity, mercy, and just dealing.

Some other rules of conduct of the ancient Egyptian conform less to present ideals. There is space to give only one example. Menthu-weser, referring to his relations with those above him in office, says, "I was one who really listened." And this emphasis on the virtue of keeping silence and giving heed to the opinions of one's superiors may be paralleled in other texts. One passage may be quoted from the Proverbs of Ptahhotep: "Profitable is hearkening for a son that hearkens. How good it is when a son receives that which his father says. He shall reach advanced age thereby. A hearkener is one whom the god loves. Who hearkens not is one whom the god hates."<sup>1</sup>

A word should be said, in closing, about the literary form of the text. The horizontal lines at the top of the stela are written in the third person, in prose, and are introductory in character. The vertical lines (read from top to bottom, beginning at the right-hand side of the stela) are autobiographical, giving a speech supposed to be addressed by the deceased Menthu-weser to all who may visit the stela. This speech is semi-poetical in that it shows traces of the kind of parallelism familiar to-day especially through the Hebrew Psalms. This arrangement of parallel verses characterized Egyptian poetry as early as the close of the fourth millennium before Christ.

C. L. R.

## TWO MEMORIAL EFFIGIES OF THE LATE XVI CENTURY

**D**URING the Middle Ages Western art differed notably from the art of the Far East in the nature of its causal impulse or inspiration. This in the former case was the teaching of the Christian church; in the latter, it was a body of social precepts which considered the family as a more or

less religious organization. The church fathers took into account this earlier cult and rather belittled it: they preached in certain instances the disrupting of family bonds, a humility which was higher than names or blazons, and in general a disregard for such vanities as memorials, whether for the quick or the dead. The strictest fathers even went so far in an opposite direction as to commend unmarked graves and ossuaries in common.

But the ancient feeling of filial piety which expressed itself in costly memorials could not be modified readily: it had grown on European soil in Roman and pre-Roman times, and although it had not rooted itself so deeply as in the East, its influence was potent. It is a curious fact, indeed, that so large a proportion of the objects of Western art preserved in our museums is of a memorial nature, things referring usually to the dead, occasionally to the living, paid for out of the family purse, and cared for by the family directly or indirectly. In fact, should we take from a modern museum, the Metropolitan Museum, for example, all objects which served to recall families or were connected with the care of the dead, we should well-nigh destroy the galleries of Egyptology and the Department of Classical Art, and we should sadly injure other branches of exhibition; important statuary would disappear, as well as much metalwork, including some of our rarest armor, together with all objects which were associated with memorial chapels and offerings — not omitting pictures and tapestries. In this connection it is now known definitely that the Museum's suite of Gothic tapestries hung in a mortuary chapel.

In the matter of commemorating the dead this condition is best illustrated among earlier objects — those which antedate the middle of the sixteenth century: after this modernism had become widespread, and ambitions developed along the lines rather of things for the living than of costly veneration for the dead. During the Middle Ages the history of these pious works can be followed with fair accuracy by tabulating the monuments with which early churches are filled; for

<sup>1</sup>Translation of Professor Breasted, *Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, p. 236.